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ABSTRACT

This study examined the interrelationships between individual development and the family system by testing the hypothesis that variations in family relations during middle adolescence are associated with psychological and social aspects of adolescent development and with parental midlife development. Data were collected from 27 parent-adolescent triads (mothers, fathers, adolescents) through individually mailed questionnaires. Measures of adolescent development included psychosocial maturity and adult role behavior. Parental midlife development was assessed by marital quality and midlife transition scales. Measures of family dynamics included assessments of family adaptability/cohesion, and communication as reported by each member of the triad. All measures had demonstrated reliability and validity. The results indicated that adolescents' and parents' reports about the parent-adolescent relationship and family functioning corresponded to their own internal and behavioral development. For example, parents perceived less optimal family functioning as their adolescent assumed more behavioral, but not more psychological maturity. In addition, parents with higher midlife crisis scores reported lower parent-adolescent communication scores. The results highlight the utility of using the family systems approach to understand adolescent and adult development and parent-adolescent relationships. (Author)

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The Family at Adolescence: The Coincidence of Parental Midlife Crisis and Children's Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interrelationships between individual development and the family system. The study tests the hypothesis that variations in family relations during middle adolescence are associated with psychological and social aspects of adolescent development and with parental midlife development. Data were collected from 27 parent-adolescent triads (mothers, fathers, and adolescents) through individually mailed questionnaires. Measures of adolescent development included psychosocial maturity and adult role behavior. Parental midlife development was assessed by marital quality and midlife transition scales. Measures of family dynamics included assessments of family adaptability/cohesion, and communication as reported by each member of the triad. All measures had demonstrated reliability and validity. Results indicated that adolescents' and parents' reports about the parent-adolescent relationship and family functioning correspond to their own internal and behavioral development. For example, parents perceived less optimal family functioning as their adolescent assumed more behavioral, but not more psychological maturity. In addition, parents with higher midlife crisis scores reported lower parent-adolescent communication scores. The results highlight the utility of using the family systems approach to understand adolescent and adult development and parent-adolescent relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Life-span development and systems theory provide the framework for this investigation. Family relationships are examined during the point in the family life cycle when children are in mid-adolescence and parents are in midlife. Whereas previous research has focused on family life during early adolescence and puberty (Steinberg, 1981; Steinberg and Hill, 1978), this study examines the middle years of adolescence and the non-biological changes that occur during this time. The integration of systems theory and life span development underscores the view that parents are integral components of the parent-adolescent relationship, and must be studied in terms of their own developmental changes. This view suggests that concurrent developmental changes in the adolescent and the parent contribute to the degree of conflict and harmony in their relationship.

The present study investigates the relations among psychological and social role changes of middle adolescence, parental midlife development, and family dynamics. Issues addressed in the present study are:

* Whether psychological and social aspects of adolescent development are related to variations in the parent-adolescent relationship.
* Whether parental midlife development (i.e., midlife crisis and marital quality) is associated with family adaptability/cohesion, and communication, and
* Whether variations in the adolescent's or parent's development is associated with variations in family dynamics as reported by other family members: specifically, does the adolescent's level of maturity influence the way parents view the family?

Does the parents' midlife crisis level influence the adolescent's view of the family?

METHODS

SUBJECTS

Twenty-seven family triads (mother, father, adolescent) served as subjects for this study. The adolescents, 13 boys and 14 girls, had a mean age of 16.6 years (s.d.=1.04). The mean age for fathers was 46.3 years (s.d.=4.84); for mothers, 43.8 years (s.d.=3.34). Only intact families were included in the study; parents had been married an average of 21.3 years (s.d.=3.91). The modal family had 2 children. The sample was predominantly caucasian (98%), and upper middle class.

PROCEDURE

Families resided in Southern California communities within a 30 mile radius of Irvine, California. Families were contacted through a variety of sources, including a "Back to School Night" and a PTA meeting. Parents of adolescents aged 15-17 were asked to return a form if they were interested in participating in the study. Following receipt of the form, surveys were mailed to each member of the 34 families who met study criteria. These families represent 80.6% of the families expressing interest in participating in the study. Surveys were mailed to each family member individually, separated by a week, with the instructions that they be filled out and returned separately to the researcher. Completed surveys were returned from 27 family triads (79.4% return rate).

MEASURES

The measures used in this study are described below. Table 1 gives the means and standard deviations for these measures used to assess adolescents and parents, and the parent-adolescent relationship. Measures of the parent-adolescent relationship were obtained from each family member of the triad.

Table 1 about here

The Midlife Transition Scale (MTS) was developed for this study as a measure of midlife crisis. The MTS was pilot tested prior to the initiation of the study to establish its reliability and validity. Table 2 provides reliability and validity information for the MTS by sex.

Table 2 about here

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

AUTONOMY: The Individual Adequacy subscale of the Greenberger et al. (1975) Psychosocial Maturity Scale was used to assess autonomy. Individual Adequacy consists of self-reliance, identity, and work orientation. Each of the 58[1] items was rated using a 4 point rating scale. High scores reflect a greater level of autonomy.

ADULT ROLE BEHAVIOR BY ADOLESCENTS: Information about the highest level of adult-role functioning in the areas of dating, driving, and employment were obtained from adolescents. The domain of

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[1] Two items deemed objectionable by the High School Administrator were removed

dating was assessed using the five response categories developed by Silverberg and Steinberg (1987). Each role was recoded to a dichotomous variable, indicating whether the adolescent had achieved a minimum level of participation in that role. "Minimum" was defined by the researcher as having gone out on a date alone, having a driver's license, and having a job. The values for each role were summed to yield an adult role functioning score for each adolescent. This score reflects the number of adult roles the adolescent has assumed.

PARENTAL DEVELOPMENT

MIDLIFE CRISIS: This 28-item scale was designed to address midlife concerns with changes in the body, time orientation, importance of values, and satisfaction with career choice and progression. Items were gleaned from research by Gould (1972, 1975, 1978), Neugarten (1965, 1966), and Cytrynbaum and colleagues (1980); many items were of the author's invention. Respondents indicated their extent of agreement/disagreement with each item on a 5 point scale. High scores reflect greater crisis.

MARITAL QUALITY: Marital quality was assessed by Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Scores on this scale reflect each individual's feelings about the functioning of the marriage. Higher scores on this scale indicate better marital quality.[2]

PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP

ADAPTABILITY AND COHESION: Assessed by a 20-item scale developed by Olson et al., (1985). Family adaptability is the extent to which

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[2] Two items deemed objectionable by the High School Administrator were removed. Scores were transformed using proportions to correspond to Spanier's coding scheme.

the family is flexible and able to change. Family cohesion refers to the degree of emotional bonding (closeness) that family members feel toward one another. The scale items are rated on a 5 point Likert scale; scores were transformed so as to produce a linear measure of family functioning which takes into account both family adaptability and cohesion. In this transformation, a lower score indicates more optimal functioning. (Conceptually, this represents distance from the center of the Circumplex model; scores in the center represent "balanced" family functioning.)

COMMUNICATION: Parent-adolescent communication was assessed for each adolescent-parent pair (i.e., adolescent-father, adolescent-mother, father-adolescent, mother-adolescent) by the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale developed by Barnes and Olson (1982). Poorer communication is indicative of poorer family functioning. This 20-item scale was completed once by each parent (indicating their communication with the adolescent), and twice by the adolescent (indicating his/her communication with mother and with father). Subscales of this measure (positive and negative communication) were combined to yield an overall communication score. High scores indicate better communication.

RESULTS

The associations between individual development of adolescents and parents, and family dynamics were analyzed using Pearson correlations. Zero-order correlations between the Midlife Transition Scale and a social desireability measure (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964--short version) revealed a significant positive association for fathers only; thus, partial correlations are used to examine the associations

between fathers' development and reports of family functioning, and semi-partial correlations were used to examine the relationships between fathers' development and adolescents' reports of family functioning.

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-REPORTS OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING:

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND ADOLESCENT REPORTS ABOUT FAMILY: Adolescents who were more autonomous reported better communication with both their mother (r=.40,p<.05) and their father (r=.52,p<.05). There was no significant association between adolescents' adult role behavior scores and the adolescents' reports of family dynamics.

PARENTAL DEVELOPMENT AND PARENT REPORTS ABOUT FAMILY:

Fathers: Fathers with higher midlife crisis scores reported poorer communication with their adolescent (r=-.59,p<.01). Fathers with better marital quality reported better communication with their adolescent (r=.36,p<.05) and better family functioning (r=-.59,p<.01).

Mothers: Higher midlife crisis scores for mothers was associated with poorer mother-adolescent communication (r=-.36,p<.05). As is the case with fathers, mothers reporting better marital quality also report more optimal family functioning (r=-.40,p<.05).

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING AS REPORTED BY OTHERS

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTS' REPORTS ABOUT FAMILY: Both mothers and fathers reported less optimal family functioning , the more adult roles their adolescent had assumed (r=.40, p<.05, and r=.48,p<.05, respectively). There were no significant associations between adolescents' level of autonomy and parents' reports of the parent-adolescent relationship.

PARENTAL DEVELOPMENT AND ADOLESCENTS' REPORTS ABOUT FAMILY:

There were no significant associations between parental development or marital quality, and the adolescents' reports of family functioning.

CONCLUSION

The major findings from this study may be summarized as follows:

* For adolescents, greater psychosocial maturity, but not behavioral maturity was associated with better communication with both parents, and more optimal family functioning as reported by the adolescent.
* For parents, higher midlife crisis scores are associated with poorer parent-adolescent communication scores, as reported by the parent. In addition, parents who report poor marital adjustment describe their family's behavior as less optimal.
* Parents perceive less optimal family functioning as their adolescents assume more behavioral maturity (i.e., assumption of adult roles), but not more psychological maturity.
* Adolescents' descriptions of family life and communication were not associated with parental midlife crisis or marial quality.

In general, the results indicate that aspects of self development (autonomy and adult role behavior for adolescents; midlife crisis and marital quality for parents) are associated with the individual's perceptions of the quality of parent-adolescent communication and family functioning. In addition, parents' views of their families are associated with the number of adult roles their adolescent has assumed.

This study demonstrates the utility of expanding the view of

changes during middle adolescence to include the acquisition of adult roles. Finally, this study underscores the importance of including mothers and fathers as contributors to the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, and studying the family system from a developmental perspective.

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TABLE 1

Descriptive statistics for major measures of the study.

Measure	N	Mean	s.d.	Range
Adolescents Only				
Autonomy	27	189.22	18.56	144-218
Adult Role Behavior	27	2.0	1.04	0-3
Parents Only				
Midlife Transition Scale				
Fathers	27	57.19	11.42	34-83
Mothers	27	59.86	10.83	41-85
Marital Quality				
Fathers	27	109.48	21.30	45.8-137.9
Mothers	27	109.31	23.80	33.3-142.7
Parents and Adolescents				
Communication				
Adolescent/Father	25	61.24	14.85	39-95
Adolescent/Mother	25	69.05	13.43	48-94
Father/Adolescent	27	74.63	12.72	50-95
Mother/Adolescent	27	78.63	9.78	56-93
Family Adaptability/Cohesion				
Adolescent	27	9.90	4.85	1.2-21.0
Father	27	8.06	4.90	2.3-20.9
Mother	27	7.99	5.48	1.1-26.8

TABLE 2

Reliability and validity data for the Hamill Midlife Transition Scale (MTS)

	CES-D Depression	Rosenberg Self-Esteem	Speilberger Trait Anxiety	Cronbach's Alpha
Mothers				
Midlife Transition Score n = 27	.32*	-.52**	.53**	.75
Fathers				
Midlife Transition Score n = 27	.46**	-.34*	.53**	.80

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$